Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT of AGRICULTURE
Radio Service
OFFICE OF INFORMATION

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT Tuesday, February 8, 1938

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, United States Department of Agriculture.

---oooOooo---

The indoor gardeners are to have the floor today--those listeners who have been asking questions about the health of their house plants. Judging from their reports, a good many plants are ailing this season. So let's call in the doctor for a house plant clinic.

The first patient today is a Christmas gift plant--a poinsettia, whose owner says she is afraid it is "going into a decline." She writes: "After my plant stopped blooming, it began to look rather sickly. It stopped growing. And it shed its leaves."

Our plant doctor is not much worried about this plant. He thinks probably it just needs a rest. Under natural conditions, he says, many plants rest about half the year. In northern climates winter is the usual resting time. In arid or semi-arid tropical regions, plants die down and rest during the dry season. Resting naturally follows flowering and fruiting. And the more the plant has grown and the heavier it has borne, the more it needs a rest. When a poinsettia after blooming begins to slow up in growth and vigor and shed some leaves, it is probably time for its nap. So don't try to stimulate it with extra water and fertilizer. Fertilizing may spur on its growth for a short time but cause it to use all its remaining vitality and possibly die as a result. Instead, it will appreciate a winter nap in a dark cool place like a cellar until about May. Unless the cellar is very dry, the plant will need water only about twice during this period. As for the temperature of the cellar or storage room for the plant, have it about 50 degrees.

Other plants that need a resting period are cyclamen, amaryllis, and all bulbous plants.

When the plant puts out a little new growth to show that it is all rested up, bring it back to the light and warmth again, give it a little water, and cut it back. When the plant comes up from its rest is also a good time to repot it in fresh rich soil.

Which brings me to another question. A listener asks when and how to fertilize house plants safely. She reports one unfortunate experience when she burned both the foliage or the roots with fertilizer.

Our plant doctor says that the only safe time to fertilize a plant is when it is growing actively. He says you can use these mixed or package fertilizers--the kind that come in powder or tablets. Or you can use sodium nitrate--an ounce dissolved in 6 quarts of water, and give the plants a little manure--10 or 12 pounds of fresh barnyard manure soaked in 20 gallons of water. As the plant grows, you can use more fertilizer, but be careful never to apply it in too strong a solution. That may burn the roots of the plant. Be careful also not to let the fertilizer come in contact with the foliage of the plant.

Another listener asks about plants that have been nipped by frost. She inquires: "Can anything be done to save a plant that has been slightly frosted?" And she goes on to say: "One cold night this winter when the radiators on our sun-porch went on a strike, several of my nicest plants were frosted. At first I thought they might survive. They still looked healthy with good color and the foliage stiff and in place. But when I took them to a warm room, the leaves became limp and dark and the plants died."

Our plant doctor says that if a plant has been frozen, even slightly, the only chance of saving it is to invert it immediately in a pail of cold water and keep it there until the frost is "drawn out." In this way, the frost comes out of the plant gradually without breaking down the tissues. (Much of the same idea as rubbing snow on a frozen foot or ear.)

Carefully trim off leaves and branches that have not fully recovered from frosting, even though this temporarily spoils the looks of the plant. You see, those dead parts are an invitation to disease which may then infect the healthy parts of the plant. You may even have to cut off the entire top of a plant, but if the roots are not damaged and the plant is carefully looked after, it will eventually grow back in shape.

Here's another question. A listener asks what temperature is right for growing house plants.

Answer: That depends on the plant. Some plants, like geranium and heliotrope, thrive in an atmosphere as warm as 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Ageratum, oleander, and salvia do best from 60 to 65. Ferns and chrysanthemums prosper in a cool place -- 50 to 60. And oxalis, ivy and some other vines like it when the thermometer goes as low as 45. Of course, the moisture in the air must be right as well as the temperature. Gardenias want a temperature of 70 to 80 and plenty of moisture.

One of the chief reasons for failure in growing house plants is that the average home today is too hot and dry for most plants. And then, the temperature in many homes goes up and down. During the day the house may be too hot for the plant--cause it to put out a large amount of tender unhealthy growth. And then at night, when the house cools down, it may be too cold and injure all this tender new growth. Extreme temperatures and changes in temperature not only harm the growth of the plant, but favor development of plant diseases because run-down plants have less resistance.

In many a home the air is only 30 percent saturated with moisture while in a well-managed greenhouse, plants live in a humidity of from 60 to 70 percent. The reason a greenhouse often seems so warm is that the humidity is high, making it seem warmer than it is.

##########